

The Exercise of American Power

Even before the Champagne bottles started to run dry yesterday morning, the reality of an ominous new year was dawning across the globe. With the threat of terrorism undiminished, the world faces two other immediate, multi-alarm crises abroad, one in Iraq, the other in North Korea. With many nations eager to assert their independence from Washington, President Bush and America's European and Asian allies will have to perform some intricate diplomatic choreography in the coming weeks if they are to avoid the unhealthy prospect of the United States acting on its own to enforce its will on other countries.

As much as Washington might like to keep North Korea's nuclear ambitions at bay until the confrontation with Iraq runs its course, there is no way to suspend the Korean crisis until a more convenient moment. Both situations demand a carefully calibrated international response that depends heavily on the United Nations Security Council and close cooperation with America's allies and friends. The new world order that has often been proclaimed since the end of the cold war but has yet to materialize can begin to take shape if President Bush musters the statesmanship to work in harness with leaders in Moscow, Beijing, Seoul, Tokyo, Riyadh, Paris, London and other capitals.

The signs suggest that Washington is moving toward war with Iraq. Mr. Bush's decision to call up military reserves, the cancellation of his January trip to Africa, the dispatch of a large Navy hospital ship to the Indian Ocean to stand by near the Persian Gulf, not to mention the continuing buildup of American combat forces in the region, all indicate that Mr. Bush believes diplomatic options are rapidly dwindling. While Iraq is ostensibly cooperating with U.N. weapons inspectors, Baghdad's overall accounting of its unconventional arms programs has been circumscribed at best and deceptive at worst. The failure to provide a full descrip-

tion of its nuclear weapons projects is especially troubling.

Mr. Bush must still exhaust the diplomatic options before ordering American forces into combat. That means carefully assessing the next report due from Hans Blix, the chief inspector, at the end of the month and making public any American intelligence information that refutes Iraq's claim that it has no menacing weapons. It also means that Mr. Bush should return to the Security Council to seek explicit authorization to use force, a step that requires the assent of Russia, China, France and Britain. That would help ensure international support for rebuilding Iraq if Saddam Hussein is ousted.

The equation in North Korea is no less difficult. Unless North Korea actually attacks one of its neighbors, Washington must rely exclusively on nonmilitary options. We were encouraged by Mr. Bush's statement Tuesday that the crisis could be handled "peacefully, through diplomacy." The Bush administration should not merely try to squeeze North Korea by isolating it economically. The better course would be to enlist the help of China, Russia, Japan and South Korea in a united diplomatic offensive that makes clear to North Korea that its powerful neighbors are willing to help if it will give up its nuclear ambitions. This time, unlike in 1994, North Korea will have to accept intrusive, nationwide inspections to reassure the world that it has really closed down its nuclear reactors, plutonium reprocessing plants and other bomb-making facilities.

The world will be watching America closely as the new year unfolds. If Mr. Bush can't find a way to work with leaders like Roh Moo Hyun, South Korea's president-elect, and President Vladimir Putin of Russia, any American diplomatic or military success may prove short-lived. The United States has overwhelming power, but over the long run it will be of use only if it is exercised with self-control.